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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the features of the City University of New York's (CUNY) open admissions plan and briefly describes its accompanying research component. Its major features are: (1) a system of 4 and 2 year colleges, with students eligible for the 4-year institutions if their high school average is 80 or better or if they rank in the top half of their class; (2) a system of university-wide testing to avoid the high attrition rates of many open door policies; and (3) the development of a large scale program of supportive services. Research on the program is being conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) and CUNY. ACE has collected data on numerous variables pertaining to student socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, as well as attitudinal information derived from questionnaires and interviews. Interviews have also been conducted with administrators and some faculty to assess the different ways in which each campus has implemented open admissions. The research will focus on: (1) characteristics of support services most closely associated with attrition rates; (2) components of remedial programs that have the greatest impact on improving skills; and (3) attitudinal and performance changes over the first year. CUNY plans to continue to expand this work, but is facing financial and administrative problems in carrying it out. (AF)

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INTRODUCTION

The open admissions program launched by the City University of New York last fall stimulated great national attention. In one sense this is suprising, since open admissions is an old idea. Numerous mid-western state universities admit all high school graduates within the state who apply. Moreover, the California system of "differential access" has been in operation for quite some time. Why then should the CUNY undertaking have received such wide attention? The answer, of course, is that the CUNY model has unique characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the features of the CUNY plan and to describe briefly its accompanying research component.

THE STRUCTURE OF OPEN ADMISSIONS IMPLEMENTATION

The CUNY plan is similar to other models in that admissions is now open to any high school graduate who applies, regardless of his high school average. However, the CUNY plan differs from others in a number of significant ways. First, the constraints of the California differential access structure are eased considerably at CUNY, although they are not entirely removed. CUNY has a system of four year senior colleges as well as two year community colleges. Admission to the senior colleges involves meeting <u>either</u> of two qualifications: 1) the student must have a high school average of 80 or better, or 2) he must rank in the top half of his class. One function of this procedure is

to open the possibility of attendance at a senior college for students from ghetto high schools who previously would not have qualified on the basis of high school average alone.

A second and very crucial feature of the plan concerns attrition. The revolving door aspect of many mid-western systems of open enrollment is well known. CUNY has made it an explicit goal to avoid this phenomenon, while at the same time maintaining standards of academic excellence. In light of the results of university-wide testing administered last year and this year to all incoming freshmen, these two latter goals are, to say the least, ambitious. Last fall in the four year senior colleges about 25% of the students scored below the 9th grade level on a standardized test of reading comprehension. In the community colleges the proportion was even larger.

This brings us to the most significant feature of open admissions: In order to avoid high attrition rates and to protect academic standards, the University has developed large scale programs of supportive services. These services involve at least four areas: 1) freshmen orientation; 2) placement procedures; 3) the development of remedial services designed to improve levels of academic skills; 4) counseling and guidance services. What goes on in these areas defines the structure of open admissions implementation, and is likely to determine various outcomes of open admissions at CUNY.

It is apparent that we have witnessed a major transformation of some of the assumptions underlying higher education in the United States. Traditionally it has been the responsibility of the individual student

to exhibit acceptable levels of academic performance. While other open admission models have expanded access to college, attrition has been viewed as due essentially to various deficiencies of the student. In the CUNY situation the system itself now assumes a major responsibility for the fate of the student. Thus, a high attrition rate would be viewed as a deficiency of the system rather than of its clients.

In the time available today it is impossible to provide a detailed commentary on the structuring of the various types of support services. However, a few comments and illustrations may be helpful. First, it should be understood that although the new admissions policy has been formulated centrally by the Board of Higher Education, each campus has had a very high degree of autonomy in implementing this policy. This has resulted in considerable diversity in campus program developments. For example, consider remediation. On some campuses students with very weak academic backgrounds may be taking all remedial work, whereas on others they may take little or none at all. In the latter instance, some would argue that placing students in remedial classes is stigmatizing and should be avoided. To take another illustration, some campuses have developed courses which are explicitly remedial and for which no academic credit is given. Conversely, on other campuses a weak student may be placed in a regular credit bearing course, but the pace of the work is stretched out considerably. Thus, a regular course which would normally meet for forty-five hours during each semester might now meet for perhaps 65 or 70 hours.

In every area of support services there is analogous diversity

of campus responses. This diversity is a fortuitous occurrence. It means that different solutions to open admissions problems have been developed. Some may work better than others. It will be the task of a research program covering several years to assess the outcomes and particularly, the ways in which these outcomes vary according to different styles of implementation. This leads to the second topic: What are the features of the research component?

RESEARCH AT CUNY

During the first year of open admissions, CUNY, contracted with the American Council on Education to conduct research on various aspects of the program. At the same time a research effort has been under way within CUNY. During this initial period, the relationship between ACE and CUNY efforts has been collaborative. Data collected at CUNY have been transmitted to ACE for merging with its data-gathering operation. By the same token the ACE data are to be transmitted to us for merging into our own files. Our responsibility has been to recover student performance data of various types, including course grades and pre- and post measures on standardized tests of academic skills. ACE has collected data on numerous variables pertaining to student socio-economic and demographic characteristics, as well as attitudinal information derived from questionnaires and interviews. Many of these variables are identical to those in the ACE national data bank and thus allow comparisons with national samples. Interviews have been conducted also with administrators and a small sample of faculty. These have aimed at

assessing the different ways in which each campus has implemented open admissions.

The pooled data will be analyzed in connection with a variety of questions. Among the most important are the following: 1) What characteristics of various support services seem most closely associated with attrition rates?; 2) What components of remedial programs appear to have the greatest impact in improving academic skills?; 3) What changes occur in the attitudes and performance of students over the course of the first year, and how are these related to their personal characteristics and the characteristics of their campuses?

Because a complete assessment of outcomes requires a longitudinal study covering several years, CUNY plans to continue and to expand the work of the first year. Our planning in this respect has been hindered considerably by the fact that this has been a difficult time in which to obtain external research funds and also because of severe constraints on the University's budget.

Quite apart from the difficulties stemming from inadequate funding, when one considers the enormous task of trying to administer a university with 18 campuses, much less the attempt to conduct research on 15, it is easy to imagine the set of political and organizational problems which would interfere with the efficient conduct of such research. I can note these only briefly and superficially: The various campuses have been united as a university for only a relatively short time. Many of them have a long history as independent entities. This means that CUNY is still in a stage of considerable conflict between the needs of

centralized administration and jealously guarded prerogatives of local autonomy. Added to this are the difficulties faced by evaluation research generally; i.e., that the objects of evaluation (in this case local campus administrations) do not relish being evaluated.

Stemming from these conditions are the facts that some campuses have been uncooperative in facilitating data collection and that there does not yet exist a uniform reporting system whereby each campus submits the same information on student performance and in the same layout.

Due in large part to these conditions, we are unable at this time to present detailed analyses on such questions as the characteristics of drop-outs and the effects on the academically weaker students of placement or non-placement in remedial courses. However, we do have some aggregate data from registrars on variables such as attrition after the first semester, and these indicate that there are not major increases. We do hope to have some more informative reports ready during the fall, and I am optimistic that the research will be affected less by the organizational problems in the future.

Our long range plans focus on a number of areas. First, we shall continue to assess the various styles displayed by the local campuses in implementing open admissions. Since last year many campuses have modified their initial responses, particularly in the areas of placement and remediation. Second, we shall continue to monitor the various dimensions of student characteristics such as grades, credits earned, and attrition as well as collecting data on socio-economic and demographic characteristics. However, the continued follow-up of small

subsets of students on each campus interviewed this year by ACE is at this point doubtful due to the tight funding situation. Third, we expect to continue the analyses linking types of implementation with student outcomes. This is of extreme importance since it will provide data on the relative effectiveness of different components of the support services. Fourth, if foundation support is forthcoming, we shall mount a detailed study of faculty responses to open admissions. This will involve a panel of about 2,500 faculty whose attitudes and behaviors will be followed over the longer term.

Finally, we think it important to look at the articulation between the University and the New York City high schools. Contingent on external funding, we shall study the effects of open admissions on the college-going and college-selection decisions of high school students. We shall assess the behavior of the high schools themselves, the characteristics of student peer groups, and families in an effort to account for differences in the extent to which graduates of various high schools utilize the opportunity for higher education provided by open enrollment.